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Teaching and Learning in Nursing

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Editorial

A Call to Action for 2021



In April 2020, I wrote an editorial about nursing leadership in the Year of the Nurse and Midwife. In my editorial, I described nurses who have historically made significant contributions to healthcare. I provided numerous examples of nurses, like Mary Seacole and Lillian Wald. They led with a social mission to serve people where they were and provide compassionate care despite challenging and, at times, adverse conditions. For Mary Seacole, that meant traveling to Crimea. For Lillian Wald, that meant providing community-based home health care (Valdez, 2020). Both nurse leaders were called to action and met that call.

When I wrote my editorial, I imagined a year of celebration and recognition of exemplary nurses. Instead, a global pandemic altered the way that humans work, learn, and interact. There was no time or space for celebration. Nurses were called to action to provide care, education, and public health leadership under dire circumstances. COVID-19 laid bare some inconvenient truths about America. We were unprepared to respond to a pandemic of this scale. Nurses and health care professionals worked and continue to provide care without adequate personal protective equipment (American Nurses Association, 2020). Hospitals were overwhelmed, and the poorly funded public health system struggled to respond. There was a lack of clarity on the plan to address COVID-19, and testing, contact tracing, and preventative measures were stalled, resulting in over 200,000 deaths by October 2020 (John Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020).

COVID-19 also highlighted stark disparities in health outcomes with Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic people dying at markedly higher rates than white people in the United States (Hooper et al., 2020; Boyd et al., 2020). These disparities, often resulting from racism and injustice, have existed for centuries (Abbasi, 2020; Hardeman & Karbeah, 2020). This is not new information. Health disparities have been researched and reported on for decades, with little action being taken to address the root causes, including racism and the resulting impact on social determinants of health (Egede & Walker, 2020; Hardeman & Karbeah, 2020).

As I write this editorial, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the only public health crisis being experienced by Americans. Racism and xenophobia have significantly impacted the health and wellness of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in the United States, resulting in adverse social determinants of health and health outcomes. In 2020, Americans watched on television and social media as numerous Black Americans, including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, and other named and unnamed humans, were murdered in their homes and neighborhoods. America also witnessed immigrant families being separated and housed in inhumane conditions during a global pandemic, which placed them at increased risk of acquiring COVID-19. Many people in America experienced a racial justice awakening in 2020. Americans of all backgrounds were in the streets protesting and demanding a just and equitable society.

Americans also experienced the impact of climate change in 2020. Personally, I had to evacuate my home yet again due to unprecedented wildfires this year. Temperatures have been at record highs in my area of the world, which is likely to continue to worsen over time resulting in significant climate-related health issues, including fires, floods, air pollution, and temperature extremes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

As I reflect on humanity's hardship in the last year, I am reminded that nurses can and should play an essential role in "nursing the nation" (McLemore, 2019) and promoting global health and wellness. In the October Special Issue on Diversity, Inclusion, and Health Equity of *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, Gravens and Goldfarb (2020) wrote about reaffirming our commitment to a nursing social mission. This call to action was aligned with the Organization of Associate Degree Nursing focus on advancing a social mission in nursing including social determinants of health. With this in mind, I am calling my nurse colleagues to action. We must act now to address the inequities in society, health, and education in the United States. I hope that the nurse educators who are reading this editorial will commit to learning about and integrating public health issues, social determinants of health, social justice, and racism in their curricula and teaching. To be effective educators and leaders, we must first make a commitment to increasing our understanding of the social and racial injustices that continue to have a profound impact on the health of Americans. My friend and nurse educator colleague, Patrick McMurray (cited by the Nursing Theory Collective, 2020), recently stated that "nursing is an act of justice." I agree and believe that nurses are being called to action to denounce injustice and create equitable futures. As you approach this new year, I encourage you to reflect on how you will demonstrate that nursing is an act of justice in 2021. Nursing has an opportunity to lead us through the public health crises we are facing in humanity. I hope that 2021 will be the new Year of Nurse and Midwife as we collectively demonstrate that we can act in solidarity to nurse the nation.

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